

11/18//07
“God’s Holy Mountain”
Isaiah 65:17-25
Brentwood First Presbyterian Church
Mike Magee

Introduction

Isaiah is the place in the OT where we find most concentrated the good news of consolation and reconciliation. George Handel knew this, and used Isaiah as the lyrics for his choral work, *The Messiah*. It has been called the 5th Gospel, the Gospel of the OT. It is quoted in the NT more often than any other book of the OT, except for the Psalms. Listen now for what God’s Spirit, through the pen of Isaiah, is telling us today.

Isaiah 65:17-25

Scene 1 – The world is full of wolves and lambs

Statistics are not as much fun as poetry, but sometimes we have to grapple with them to understand the breadth and scope of a problem. The New York Times says the cyclone in Bangladesh this week killed 1700 and created 1.5 million refugees. Our own natural disaster, Katrina, killed 1800 and created 1 million refugees. And in the worst natural disaster in modern times, the 2004 tsunami killed 225,000. Other than provide better disaster relief, there is probably nothing we can do to prevent deaths due to natural causes.

So who are the wolves and who are the lambs in today's news? Fighting in Darfur has killed 400,000 and created 2.2 million refugees. Who is the wolf? The army who is doing the killing, or the bystander who does nothing about it?

In comparison with the 1800 American deaths from Katrina, and the 2,900 who died on 9/11, 3800 young Americans have died in the second gulf war. Let me say that again. 3800 young Americans have lost their lives in the second gulf war. In comparison with the 50,000 Kurds killed by Saddam Hussein, and 225,000 international deaths due to the tsunami, the British medical journal *Lancet* reported in June 2006 that 650,000 Iraqis have died in the second gulf war, including disease and other non-violent causes, 150,000 due to violence. Let me say that again. 650,000 Iraqis have lost their lives in the second gulf war. 500 Iraqis die due to the war every day, 100 from armed conflict. Is your head spinning because of the carnage? Then let's shift gears.

Let us look at another statistic. Worldwide, 16,000 children die from hunger every day. One every 5 seconds. From the time I started speaking to the time I stop, 5 Iraqis will have died, but 144 children will have died due to starvation.

Let me give you one last statistic. One way for a hungry person in a developing country to improve their life is to emigrate. And because of our restrictive immigration policies, the US itself is home to 12 million undocumented immigrants, most of whom are paid less than minimum wage. They are paid less than minimum wage doing work no one else wants to do: they are nannies, housecleaners, landscapers, and roofers.

Are these figures depressing? Let me tell you, depression occurs not just in individuals, but also in entire communities. A community that has never known anything but **O**ppression. A community too downtrodden, too exhausted, too distracted by daily dilemmas to see a bright vision of their future. Too stressed out, too involved with misery, too distracted by detail to see hope for the future. Sound like today? Isaiah sees such a community in the 5th century before Jesus. A community depressed. The people are still laboring under curse and embarrassment. Curse and embarrassment from the Babylonians casting them out of their Holy City, Jerusalem. Cast off their Holy Mountain. Cast out of paradise. Children born in pain. Work and toil at an unforgiving soil. Children who fear and mourn death. In Babylon only a few years ago they were slaves. And even now they are still slaves to all the work before them. The Genesis story of the curse of Adam and Eve. Where is God? The heart of depression.

But is this what God's kingdom looks like? No! Isaiah tells us what God's kingdom looks like. First of all, Isaiah tells us that in God's kingdom, the labor of child birth will still occur. But children will no longer be born into a world of war and famine. Secondly, Isaiah tells us that in God's kingdom, human beings will still toil, but all will be compensated fairly. Thirdly, Isaiah tells us death still occurs, but in the new creation, death will not ruin life. As we all try to live in the gap between *what is now* and *what one day will be*, sometimes knowing that things are supposed to be different gives us energy to take another step forward.

Scene 2 – On God's Holy Mountain the temple will be recreated

The children of Israel are not pleased with the newly constructed second temple. It does not look like their memory of Solomon's temple. They bicker and fight over what they see. The second temple is small and ugly, but so are their hearts. At such times vision must come from somewhere else because we just cannot see new realities.

People ask me every now and then why I started coaching baseball. I was standing behind my children's baseball coach when they were on the same team, at ages 5 and 6. The team had just won, 10 runs to 6. Of course, at ages 5 and 6, who won is less relevant than did you get to touch the ball. I don't think even the parents care whether they won or lost. But while standing behind him during his post game message, I discover that this coach does. He proceeds to berate the kids because they came within 4 runs of tying the worst team in the division. He actually told the kids that if anyone asked them how they did, they should say they lost. I think the only one who lost was the coach. He lost an opportunity. An opportunity to have made the children feel good about themselves. Feel good for something they had accomplished. As a result of this coach's attitude, they did start losing games. They lived up to, or in this case, down to, the coach's expectations. I knew nothing about coaching baseball, but I knew he could do a better job coaching than this.

Isaiah tells us God's new heaven and new earth will not be the result of restoration. Not restoration to the glory of Solomon's temple. Not restoration, because God creates a new thing. The new temple will be better. But perhaps Isaiah is not talking about bricks and mortar. Perhaps he is not talking about

restoration of engraved cypress and olive wood panels. Not restoration of bronze columns and gold foil. Perhaps that is not what Isaiah is writing about. Perhaps Isaiah is talking about creating not a new temple of brick and mortar, but a new temple of the human heart. A new heart.

Scene 3 On God's Holy Mountain no longer will people hurt or destroy

Isaiah sees a people who hold a grudge against the people in the surrounding lands. Who hold a grudge against the Babylonians and the Edomites, who terrorized their parents. And Isaiah sees a people who in the midst of adversity bicker and fight among themselves. Members of different families terrorizing each other like the Hatfields and the McCoys.

What does it take for a *lamb* to agree to eat with a *wolf*? Let's be honest. Whenever someone hurts your feelings, or slanders you, you want to strike back. But does striking back, taking revenge, ever help anyone? Over and over again we have examples where revenge does not stop violence. Look at the Hatfields and the McCoys. Look at the Palestinians and the Israelis. What does it take for a *lamb* to agree to eat with a *wolf*? Only unmerited forgiveness and trust can stop violence. I was asked at Bible study this week how many times we have to forgive. The Gospels give us an answer on that one. 70 x 7. We never stop forgiving.

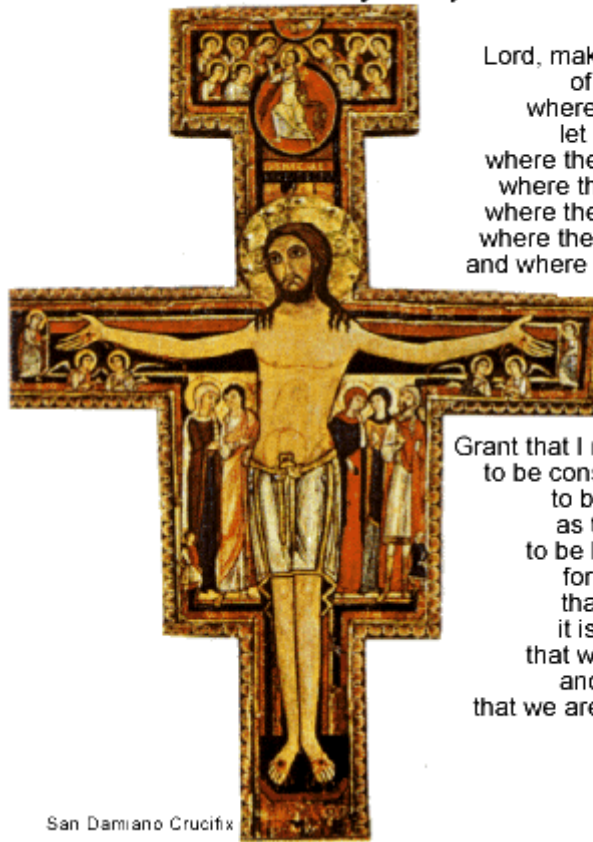
In God's kingdom, all of God's creation will live in peace. The inhabitants of God's kingdom will no longer hurt or destroy each other. The Jews newly arrived from Babylon will not hate the Babylonians or the Edomites. Revenge will

stop in the here and now. The wolf and the lamb WILL feed together in God's peaceable kingdom.

Conclusion

Isaiah invites us today to live on God's Holy Mountain. Where no one shall hurt or destroy. Where devouring lions become vegetarians. And wolves agree not to eat defenseless lambs. Where the hearts of baseball coaches, the Hatfields and the McCoys, and the combatants in the gulf war, are recreated, and all lay down their arms in forgiveness and embrace one another. Where the hearts of those in power are recreated, and the refugees in Darfur, undocumented immigrants, and starving children, all receive justice. But God's holy mountain is not a rose garden. It is not a utopian never-never land in the bye and bye. As disciples of Jesus, we are God's eyes, hands, and feet. We are living sanctuaries for God's Spirit. And ushering in God's kingdom is hard work and takes time. But we are not alone, for God is with us, giving us strength and courage. Eternity begins now. Glory be to God, Hallelujah, and all God's children say ...

Peace Prayer of St. Francis



San Damiano Crucifix

Lord, make me an instrument
of your peace;
where there is hatred,
let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
and where there is sadness, joy;

Grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console;
to be understood,
as to understand,
to be loved as to love;
for it is in giving
that we receive,
it is in pardoning
that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying
that we are born to eternal life.